

## Homily for The Second Sunday of Advent (Year B) (6<sup>th</sup> December 2020)

The readings today are full of joy and anticipation: In Isaiah the joyful messenger has exciting news for the people of Jerusalem and Judah – ‘Here is your God’. St Peter is watching for a new heaven and a new earth. John the Baptist is crying in the wilderness that now is the time to shout out that the Lord is near. In the communion antiphon Jerusalem is seen as a watchman, standing on the ramparts looking out eagerly, waiting to see the first sign that the bringer of joy approaches. The theme is clear, and it is one of the fundamental ideas that runs through our liturgy in Advent. We are called out from the world to be watchers, watchers alert and poised, always looking intently at the horizon to catch a glimpse of something new.

I was thinking of this theme of watchfulness as I was driving along the A272 the other day (something I do quite often). When you are driving it becomes almost second nature to be watchful. On a barely conscious level you are on the lookout for danger: the child that might step out into the road; the cat that might shoot across your path; the car that might pull out in front of you. Even the simplest and most familiar journey is a bundle of barely thought out attentiveness to what might go wrong. But other things catch the driver’s eye as well: the glorious view of the weather rolling across the south downs; the parallel lines of vines marching across the rolling countryside, the birds, beautiful villages and wonderful views. So the driver is watchful on two levels at the same time: watching for danger, for problems, for things to avoid; watchful also for wonder and beauty and things to celebrate. In the same way the watchman on the city walls is looking out for two things: for danger, approaching armies and threat; but also for riders bringing good news, news of a royal birth or of a famous victory or a homecoming army. Watchfulness carries a sense that at any moment the world could change, and that might be a change for good or for ill, and the watchman is there to see the change coming so that the people can magnify the joy and resist the danger.

If the watchman only looks out for good things, then he fails in his job because he leaves the city vulnerable: vulnerable to unseen and unnoticed danger, just like the driver who is so wrapped up in the beauty of the scenery that he doesn’t see potential threats. But at the same time, the watchman who looks out only for danger also fails in his job. He doesn’t see the beauty and the joy, he doesn’t see the hope and the city is vulnerable still; vulnerable to hopelessness, to a kind of edgy living that is obsessed with threats but fails to see the joy and the wonder. The watchman can neither be obsessed with only the good that he sees, nor only with the bad. He looks carefully for the signs of what is coming, and reports what he sees, whether that is news of joy or news of danger.

So when we are hoisted up onto the city walls and called to be watchmen, standing upon the heights where the view is clear and far-reaching, we are there searching for danger but also for delight. Sometimes people see the Church as more inclined to shout out the bad news than the good, more inclined to criticise than to praise, more inclined to complain about what is lost than to greet what has been found. Sometimes that is a fair criticism. Sometimes we perceive danger more easily than

we spot opportunities. Advent is a time of simplicity and emptiness, a time of silence given to us so that we can hear more clearly even the quietest of voices: voices that speak of peace, hope renewal and change, as well as voices of darkness and self-obsession. In the silence of this season we train our ears to hear more clearly; in the darkness of this season our eyes are trained to look more closely.

We are watching for the dawn, whatever it may bring. We are invited to look carefully at the world around us and to see the dangers and pitfalls, the things that may be tempting and enticing but which will lead us into slavery; and to see also the opportunities that help us to be more human, the chances to be heralds of hope. It is a strange and confusing world; more so than ever this year. What we need so badly is clarity, a clarity that shouts out the opportunities for a more human and grace-filled life, but also the dangers that might conceal it. Let us not get so caught up in being busy that we fail to see these things.

You are a watcher, combing the horizon for good news, for moments of hope in a difficult time, places where human life is being lived to the full. And when you see them, share them.